

NEWS

A rare French sports car stolen in Milwaukee is at center of long legal fight. A Bristol-based restoration expert says it might be a fake

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BRISTOL - What if the rare 1938 French sports car at the center of a protracted Wisconsin lawsuit over ownership isn't actually the stolen car everyone thinks it is?

An auto historian and restoration expert in Bristol says he is positive the car is a replica worth roughly \$3 million but not the \$7 million a Chicago tycoon paid for it. Nor is it worth the \$13.4 million a similar, authentic Talbot Lago Teardrop coupe recently brought at auction.

David Cooper owns Cooper Technica, a sprawling shop where he restores all manner of rare antique and very expensive European cars, and specializes in pre-World War II French automobiles. Among the many specialty tools he uses are two massive steampunk-styled "crow forming machines" that coach builders in 1930s France used to form sheet metal into streamlined shapes.

"It gives you a complete vocabulary of curves," Cooper said.

Currently, he's working on a Bugatti, a Delage and a Talbot Lago, among others.

That's how he was familiar with the 1938 Talbot Lago T150-C SS, whose provenance could drive the plot of a Hollywood heist movie.

The car surfaced in Europe, where Cooper says he saw it under restoration at a French shop. That came sometime after the car was stolen from Milwaukee in 2001 and before it was sold to a Chicago dental tycoon in 2015.

He said the front cross member of the chassis is not forged metal, like an original would be. Metallurgical testing on the rest of the frame would likely prove it's not the kind of steel used in France in the 1930s, he said. Forensic vetting of claims about rare autos is another part of Cooper's professional repertoire.

In pre-WW II French auto industry, certain manufacturers like Talbot Lago, Bugatti and Delage made frames and drive trains. Wealthy buyers would then have the bodies, or "coaches," hand built by different companies — such as Figoni et Falaschi, which designed the "teardrop" coupe.

"The chassis is the identity of the car," Cooper said. So even if some other parts of the contested Talbot Lago Teardrop are original, it's not considered that car if it's not the original chassis, according to Cooper.

Cooper said he told the last buyer, Illinois dental tycoon Rick Workman, "It might be a fake car, but it's not a stolen car," and Workman said that turned the whole case upside down.

The basis of the claim against Workman for the car is it is the vehicle stolen from Milwaukee over 20 years ago. One of the plaintiffs, Joseph L. Ford III, says Cooper is wrong, and the foremost Talbot Lago expert in the world, hired by the FBI, has confirmed the frame's authenticity. Ford also notes in Cooper's sworn deposition, Cooper said he had no personal knowledge of whether the car Workman bought had any original or nonoriginal parts.

Workman's attorneys declined to discuss the matter. Both sides are preparing to litigate whether a mediator's settlement plan can be enforced.

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A twisted transaction history

Roy Lieske of Milwaukee bought the car in 1968 and spent years with little luck trying to restore or sell it. He seemed happier talking about the project than completing it. The small world of collectors of such cars knew about its dusty, disassembled life in Lieske's old plastics factory off Brady Street.

In 2001, professional thieves broke in and stole all the parts and paperwork. Lieske died before it was ever recovered. His cousin, Richard "Skip" Mueller, inherited its ownership — if not the missing car — along with the rest of Lieske's estate.

Cooper wasn't the only rare car aficionado to cross paths with the Talbot Lago. Ford, a lawyer and car buff from Florida, also had seen it in France. Each man knew Christopher Gardner, an American expatriate in Switzerland.

Ford and Gardner had worked together to try and obtain parts of a stolen Ferrari, a partnership that later blew up amid much legal acrimony. Gardner had once tried to sell Cooper parts for a car he was restoring.

Gardner was charged in Milwaukee in 2019 with stealing the Talbot Lago from Lieske, stashing it in California a few years, then shipping it to Europe before finally selling it to Workman in 2015. The FBI says Gardner is under arrest in Europe, but his extradition status is unclear.

In 2013, Ford reached out to Mueller and said he could help him recover Lieske's car. They drew up a contract giving Ford an 80 percent ownership stake, and they got the car listed back on a national database of stolen vehicles.

Gardner, based on forged documents, had convinced Milwaukee police in 2005 he legally purchased it, and had it removed from the stolen list, according to court records.

Milwaukee police were notified after Workman bought the car in 2015, shipped it back to the U.S. and tried to register it in Illinois. They told Ford and Mueller. They explained to Workman the true history of the car and demanded its return to its lawful owners. Workman, Ford said, could then seek his damages from Gardner and the broker who handled the sale.

Workman declined, Ford and Mueller sued, and the Wisconsin Supreme Court agreed their claim for "replevin" could go to trial.

The engine

Here's how Cooper says he got sucked into the case: He had heard about the possible sale of the car, and said he warned the broker, Paul Russell of Massachusetts, not to trust Gardner, that the car might be stolen, or faked. But he said Russell felt he had everything straight on the deal.

Cooper also told Russell the car didn't have the original, larger racing engine. A French mechanic Cooper had worked with before had it; he'd held it as collateral when Gardner didn't pay for the work on it he'd commissioned. Russell wasn't interested.

Then Ford contacted him, Cooper said, offering to buy the engine, and flew up from Florida to meet him and see Cooper's shop. Cooper said he wasn't interested in selling to Ford until he was absolutely sure Russell nor Workman wanted the engine.

A few months later, Milwaukee police and the FBI show up, saying Ford told them Cooper was trying sell stolen property. After about four hours of talking, Cooper said, "they backed off, and asked me to help them unravel the rest of the story as I knew all the people."

"Then they went to France and took the engine," from the mechanic. "He was tired of the whole affair — and he's still out the money" Gardner owed." The engine is now in evidence locker at the FBI field office in St. Francis.

Ties to the Big Screen

Cooper, 65, grew up in the Chicago area. His family ran a business making parts for machines used in the garment industry. He worked there until the family sold it when he was in his early 30s.

Cooper also raced vintage cars and began making unobtainable parts at his family's fabricating shop, for his own cars, then for fellow racers. An acquaintance hired him to do Cooper's first full restoration, a 1937 Frazier-Nash BMW 328, working in the glass-walled garage in Highland Park, Illinois used in the film, Ferris Bueller's Day Off.

After 29 years in Chicago, he moved to the 19,000-square-foot shop in Bristol. He employs about five other craftsmen and has a smaller shop in Lyon, France. In addition to all the cars in progress, the shop features a collection of vintage bicycles as well.

He's currently got several jobs going. Some are updates to relatively modern cars whose owners want to be able to drive them around on weekends, like a 1954 Austin Healy and 1970 Renault Alpine A110.

The passion projects are years along and still not done. It takes patience, resourcefulness and incredible skills to rebuild a sliding sunroof of wooden slats and the peculiar, rotary style adjustable rear shock absorbers for a 1935 Bugatti, type 57 Atalante.

That level of detail is for cars destined to be worth millions and displayed at the most prestigious automobile shows and auctions in the world.

Though he appreciates the design, engineering and craftsmanship of his projects, Cooper seems most compelled by their stories.

Cooper's also excited about a Delage, the first real four-passenger sports touring car, once owned by early 20th Century socialite and fashion icon Millicent Rogers. In an article for collierautomedia.com, Cooper describes when Rogers first encountered the car the 1937 Paris auto show:

"The scene was majestic, the gleaming new model sitting upon marble pillars above a Persian carpet. For a person with a taste for the finest things in life, an apt description of Millicent Rogers, it was a propitious time."

He doesn't need notes to tell the detailed history of another car at his shop.

"This 1943 Alfa Romeo 2500 SS was custom built for a Nazi field marshal," Cooper said, one of only 28 cars the company made during World War II.

Allied forces captured the commander in 1945, and the car was eventually delivered to him as he was dying of a brain tumor in an Italian hospital. It was sold again to an American, spent 50 years in California. Cooper tracked it down in New Zealand six years ago for a local client.

"You shouldn't start a big restoration without knowing the history of a car."

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